



CITY COUNCIL

HARB Appeal Hearing

***HARB APPEAL HEARING
COUNCIL CHAMBERS***

MON, JANUARY 14, 2008

Opening Matters

Call to Order

Purpose

To approve or deny the application for a certificate of appropriateness submitted by Ken Pick, Berks County Community Development Director and United Corestacks Inc, for the demolition of 713-717 Laurel Street, owing to the unsuitable condition of the properties. HARB determined that the demolition was inappropriate pursuant to the Secretary of Interior Historic Architecture Preservation guidelines.

The applicant has appealed the decision to Reading City Council.

The hearing will have three components 1) Presentation by Amy Johnson, Historic Preservation Specialist 2) Presentation by the applicants: 3) Council comment. City Council will adopt a resolution either approving or denying the appeal either or announce the date when the decision will be issued.

Swearing in of all parties providing testimony

"Do you solemnly swear or affirm that the testimony, both oral and documentary, which you are about to give will be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?"

Findings of Fact:

- Testimony from Property Owner/Applicant
- Findings of Fact from Historic Preservation Specialist
- Property Owner/Applicant Rebuttal
- Public Comment
- Cross Examination by Council

Expected Date of Decision

Adjournment of Hearing

Adjourn

THE READING BOARD OF HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW
MEETING, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 18, 2007

The meeting was called to order at 7:40 p.m. by Chairperson O. Christopher Miller, who noted the presence of a quorum.

MEMBERS PRESENT

O. Christopher Miller, Chairperson
Cynthia LaSota, Secretary
Frank L. Gilyard
Laura James
Peter Sutliff
Allen Webster

STAFF PRESENT

Amy W. Johnson

OTHERS PRESENT

Jonathon Shauf, 240 N. 5th St.
Floyd Stahl, 240 N. 5th St.
Magaly Cartagena, 607 ½ S. 6th St.
Rufina Cartagena, 607 ½ S. 6th St.
Enrique Cartagena, 607 ½ S. 6th St.
Decire Polanco, 308 N. 5th St.
Ray Gonzalez, 308 N. 5th St.
Francisca Mendez, 428 Spring St.
Jorge Mendez, 428 Spring St.
Phung Vang, 1101 Walnut St.
Ken Pick, 713, 715, 717 Laurel St.
Juan Perez, 141 N. 5th St.
Yasmilda Torres, 141 N. 5th St.
Bob Hettrick, 832 N. 4th St.
Robert Hettrick (Sr.), 832 N. 4th St.

ITEM #1 713, 715, 717 Laurel St.
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Berks County Redevelopment Authority, Owner

**FACTS CONCERNING HISTORICAL AND
ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE**

713 Laurel Street - This two story row home received a site quality rating of 8 and is not a contributing site in the Prince Historic District. The historical integrity of this structure has been substantially compromised with the application of vinyl siding to the western and southern facades and with the installation of replacement windows and the front entrance door.

715 and 717 Laurel Street - This pair of simple one and a half story houses constructed in the late 1900's, received a site quality rating of 72 and are significant contributing sites in the Prince Historic District. Built in the Federal style, the structures were most likely constructed as worker homes for the former Reading Iron Company (currently United Corrstack) located across the street. The structures retain their original brick façades but have been compromised with the installation of vinyl replacement windows, replacement of the front entrance doors and modification of the roofing material at the main roof. Of particular note is that the structures were built before Laurel Street was graded to the level it is currently and therefore the first floor level of both homes are located below the existing pavement level.

PROPOSED SCOPE OF WORK

the demolition of the three structures.

REASONS OF APPLICANT FOR PURSUING PROPOSED SCOPE OF WORK

The Berks County Redevelopment Authority has acquired the three properties through the County's Acquisition, Demolition, Disposition (ADD) Program and would like to demolish the properties and turn them over to United Corrstack for the construction of a parking lot for their employees who work in the United Corrstack factory across the street.

FINDINGS OF THE BOARD

Mr. Pick, Director of the Berks County Community Development Department, explained to the Board that the Berks County Redevelopment Authority has been working with United Corrstack, located across the street at 720 Laurel Street, to acquire the properties through the County's ADD Program and turn them over to United Corrstack for the construction of a parking lot. Mr. Pick explained that before the properties recently became vacant, they were heavily used for prostitution and drugs. Ms. Johnson stated that she and Mr. Pick spent a morning last week touring the buildings and taking photographs of their interiors and exteriors. Ms. Johnson presented the photographs to the Board noting that the rears of the properties, which would have been additions to the original structures, are severely deteriorated. Ms. Johnson noted that the Prince Historic District map notes the historical significance of 715 and 717 Laurel Street in that they were built in the late 1800's before the 700 Block of Laurel Street was graded and therefore the first floor of the structures are located below the current grade level. Ms. Johnson stated that the second floors of the structures have retained original wide wood planking which denotes the age of the buildings and further noted that the 717 Laurel Street was in the best condition.

Mr. Webster stated that at one time a creek ran through the Reading Iron Playground on Laurel Street and when the city built a tunnel over the creek, the road bed was raised.

Mr. Pick explained that the Authority is focusing on only 713-717 Laurel Street at the present time due to the fact that 719 Laurel Street is still in private ownership. Mr. Pick stated that 719 Laurel Street is more deteriorated in condition than the properties in question as there was previously a fire in the building. Ms. Johnson explained that a few years ago, the structure at 711 Laurel Street was demolished without HARB review or approval and therefore a vacant lot was created of which was constantly filled with trash. In turn United Corrstack erected a chain link and barbed wire fence across the front of the property this past August without a zoning permit, building permit or HARB permission. The properties are in an R-3 zone and barbed wire is strictly forbidden. Ms. Johnson sent a violation letter and spoke to a representative of Corrstack about the issue. The barbed wire on top of the chain link fence was removed but to date Corrstack still does not have a zoning permit, building permit or permission from the HARB for the fence.

Mr. Webster inquired as to why 719 Laurel Street is not included in the demolition proposal. Mr. Pick replied that he hasn't been able to acquire the property. Mr. Webster inquired as to when the properties were constructed. Ms. Johnson replied that the properties were constructed in the late 1800's and again noted that the floor boards on the second floor of the properties are very wide which would be indicative of their age. Mr. Webster stated that he feels the properties were probably pre Civil War and were built as worker homes for the various factories in the district. Mr. Webster noted that the structures are severely deteriorated but they are a significant remnant from the 1850's and 1860's and might be the last of these type of home. Mr. Webster stated that it looks as if the proposed parking lot will only be able to accommodate seven or eight cars. Mr. Pick stated that a plan for the parking lot hasn't been developed yet.

Mr. Gilyard inquired as to whether the Centre Park Artifacts Bank will be able to salvage from the buildings. Mr. Pick replied that he always informs the Artifacts Bank when a structure will be demolished so that they can salvage from the buildings. Mr. Webster inquired as to when the site visit was made by Mr. Pick and Ms. Johnson, was the basement entered and were there visible hand hewn joists. Mr. Webster stated that he has seen hand hewn joists in buildings in the neighborhood. Ms. Johnson replied that they did not enter the basements for safety reasons. Mr. Pick stated that he tried to determine the structure of the floor joists in one property but it was impossible to see. Mr. Pick stated that the wider boards were located on the second floor. Mr. Webster noted that when the buildings were built, four to six inch floor boards were preferred on the first floor and wider floor boards were reserved for the upper floors and the attic as they were a cheaper material.

Mr. Webster inquired as to why, if Corrstack is interested in constructing a parking lot on the site, wouldn't there be cause for them to pay for the demolition of the structures. Mr. Pick replied that the ADD Program allows for the demolition of the structures and the construction of a parking lot due to the fact that it is an economic development project and the open space will be used for a commercial advantage. Mr. Webster inquired as to whether the ADD Program could be used for a commercial use as he was under the understanding that the program was used for residential purposes. Mr. Pick replied that yes, the Program could be used for commercial projects. Mr. Webster inquired as to whether there have been any sites given to the public in this neighborhood through the ADD Program. Mr. Pick replied that he is not aware of any sites being given to the public without checking his records. Mr. Webster stated that he is more in favor of the homes in the area being rehabilitated and feels the demolition money should be used to stabilize the properties.

Ms. James inquired as to what the concerns of the Executive Committee were. Mr. Miller stated that the style of the buildings, 715 and 717 Laurel Street in particular, is noteworthy but the existing condition of the properties are such that they may put the public's health, safety, and welfare in jeopardy. Mr. Miller stated that he feels the buildings don't relate to the original intent of the neighborhood and historic district and that they are out of context with the neighborhood. Mr. Webster stated that he disagrees and noted that around the corner on South Seventh Street are intact, viable row homes similar in style to those in question. Mr. Webster noted that the United Corrstack property is not located in the historic district and does not relate in scale with the buildings in question. Mr. Webster inquired as to how these structures that are nearly in their original state are considered out of context when they clearly relate to the residential properties around the corner.

A motion was made to approve the demolition of the structures. The vote was taken with three yeas and three nays and therefore the motion did not pass.

RECOMMENDATION OF THE BOARD

issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to the Berks County Redevelopment Authority, owner of 713, 715, and 717 Laurel Street, for the demolition of the three structures as proposed due to the significant site quality ratings of 715 and 717 Laurel Street and according to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* which does not recommend: "Removing or radically changing those features of the district or neighborhood which are important in defining the overall historic character so that, as a result, the character is diminished." However, it is to be noted that the Board recognizes the comments of the HARB Executive Committee concerning the deteriorated condition of the majority of the properties and their immanent threat to the public's health, safety, and welfare. A motion was made by Mr. Gilyard and seconded by Mr. Sutliff to approve the demolition of the three structures as proposed. The vote was taken with three yeas and three nays (3-3). Therefore the motion does not carry and demolition of the three properties is denied.

RESOLUTION NO. 147-07

BE IT HEREBY RESOLVED by the Reading Historical Architectural Review Board:

Appropriateness **NOT** be issued to the Berks County Redevelopment Authority, owner of 713, 715, and 717 Laurel Street, for the demolition of the three structures as proposed due to the significant site quality ratings of 715 and 717 Laurel Street and according to the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation and Guidelines for Rehabilitating Historic Buildings* which does not recommend: "Removing or radically changing those features of the district or neighborhood which are important in defining the overall historic character so that, as a result, the character is diminished." However, it is to be noted that the Board recognizes the comments of the HARB Executive Committee concerning the deteriorated condition of the majority of the properties and their immanent threat to the public's health, safety, and welfare."

I hereby certify that the foregoing is a true and correct copy of the resolution adopted by the Reading Historical Architectural Review Board at the meeting held on December 18, 2007.

AMY WOLDT JOHNSON
Historic Preservation Specialist

